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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 007394

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [BG](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: PRE-SAARC INDIA GOES EASY ON BANGLADESH

REF: A. CALCUTTA 449

[B](#). NEW DELHI 6983

[C](#). DHAKA 1697

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt. Reasons 1.4 (B,D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Bangladesh Foreign Minister Morshed Khan's November 1 stop in New Delhi was officially scheduled to deliver India's invitation to January's SAARC Summit in Dhaka, but also provided an opportunity for bilateral discussions on festering cross-border issues. The GOI resisted the temptation to use the visit to beat up on Khan, and this latest round did not yield any breakthroughs, but with a PM level meeting coming during the January SAARC Summit in Dhaka, it may have paved the way for a lowering of tensions then. New Delhi has shown an increased willingness to share information with us about developments in Bangladesh, but like us is struggling to find a recipe for reversing the crisis of governance there. End Summary.

Only the Messenger

[1](#)2. (C) Morshed Khan came to New Delhi as the special envoy of PM Khaleda Zia to deliver India's January SAARC Summit invitation, and although the visit included the full complement of bilateral interactions, the GOI did not take him to task over allegations that Bangladesh is becoming a safehaven to Indian separatists and Islamic terrorists. Rather, according to MEA Director (Bangladesh) TS Sandhu, the GOI "kept it positive." Sandhu cautioned that Khan's forthcoming attitude would still have to be "matched on the ground." Border issues, including resolution of the undemarcated portions and coordinated patrols, figured in the discussions, but without resolution. In India, Khan also met with leaders of the Left parties, whose main power base is West Bengal, bordering Bangladesh. Sandhu thought this was an important exchange because that state's connection with Bangladesh could act as a buffer in the Delhi-Dhaka relationship.

"Growing Intolerance"

[1](#)3. (C) Although he claimed to agree with PolCouns' assertion of the US point of view that the overriding issue in Bangladesh is one of governance, Sandhu focused on "growing intolerance" as the most important concern. He added that Dhaka is creating a "breeding ground" for forces inimical to the BDG and potentially India and the US. Sandhu noted that the GOI would like to see the BDG at a minimum apply "positive pressure" against these groups and thought the US could be effective in helping Bangladesh "see reality and not become boxed-in." Like others in the GOI he was seized with the presence in Dhaka of ULFA leader Paresh Barua who he suggested had escaped from prison in Bangladesh by exploiting local political connections.

GOI and UK Share Their Assessments

[1](#)4. (S/NF) Indian intelligence officials recently provided DIA a classified briefing on "Terrorism in Bangladesh" which offered some insights into Indian allegations. The report indicated that the number of Jamaat Islami (JI) affiliated madrassas in Bangladesh has grown to 6,024 and reiterated a point the GOI had made to PDAS Don Camp in June that the jetty used in April's Chittagong arms haul was under the control of JI Amir Matiur Rahman Nizami. The Indians also noted that Dhaka has called for the arrest of Bangla Bhai, the Islamist vigilante leader of the anti-BDG Jagrata Muslim Janat Bangladesh (JMJB) (ref C), but he remains at large with the aid of leaders of the governing Four Party Alliance. Intelligence officials cited a Saudi-based NGO, Al Harmain Islamic Foundation and Studies Institute, with offices in Dhaka operating in the capital and Cox's Bazaar. The report concluded that democracy in Bangladesh has been "jeopardized by fundamentalist elements" and because of the JI's role in the governing coalition, the BDG cannot eradicate the extremists.

[1](#)5. (S) A report passed to us by the UK High Commission (strictly protect) corroborated concerns about the Cox's

Bazaar region and foreign funding. The GOI also asserted that the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) area is a base for Islamic extremist groups, including Al Qaeda, whereas the UK paper highlighted the CHT for not being home to such groups, although Chittagong and Cox's Bazaar are. Rather than JI madrassas in these areas, the UK report continued, it is those linked to the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ, also part of the governing coalition) in which the problem is most acute. The British report also noted the presence of Southeast Asian students in these areas.

Comment

16. (C) It will be interesting to watch how, if at all, the BDG response to Indian allegations of harboring militants changes in light of Burma's commitment to quashing cross-border insurgent activity during Than Shwe's New Delhi visit (ref B) and the seemingly connected crackdown in Manipur during the last few weeks (ref A). The GOI's willingness to combine their allegations with specific information shared with us is an important move towards greater India-US CT cooperation in this area. The inconsistencies with the British report, however, highlight the need for more ongoing dialogue with our various Indian interlocutors.

17. (C) Khan's visit was his second to New Delhi since the UPA came to power in May, and in early January, Manmohan will meet PM Zia for the second time at the SAARC Summit. If the PM continues his record of making last minute policy moves, as he did with the troop drawdown in Kashmir before his visit there, and the preferential trade agreement with Thailand when he reached Bangkok in July, continues, there is a possibility of a step forward in India-Bangladesh relations when the PMs sit down in Dhaka. But for now, we have yet to see evidence that India and Bangladesh have found a recipe for reversing the downturn in their bilateral relations.
BLAKE